

disarming cantankerous people:

Coping with difficult personalities in ECE work settings

by Luis Hernandez and Connie Jo Smith

You know them. Yes, them. Those people that can make life at work a miserable experience. People problems in work settings is the top stressor for most workers. We love the job, but these other people can make the experience fairly miserable.

Who are these folks? They are the ones that we can easily recognize because they can bug us individually or can drive the entire team bonkers. They are the ones who:

- are bossy
- act superior
- are loud and aggressive
- are phonies
- try to please too much.

Difficult personalities come in a variety of roles in just about every setting — unless you work alone and then you can drive yourself nuts!

While these types have been identified in the typical corporate and business culture, difficult work personalities also inhabit the world of ECE workplaces. While it may seem hard to conceive that difficult people lurk amongst the rest of us great humans, cantankerous folks have infiltrated the best of settings.

Of interest is the amount of research and popular writing on the subject. Because difficult people have an impact on workplace morale and productivity, the topic has led to research and analysis, all with a popular bent on how to avoid bodily harm to those that make us miserable.

Robert M. Bramson, the author of *Coping With Difficult People*, has characterized infuriating people into types and prescribe ways to deal with them. Many of those types are highlighted for this article. A list of some of these resources and their colorful titles can be found at the end of this article.

Difficult types

In describing the following people who can create problems in our programs, we want to support high-quality management of agencies that serve children and families. Keep in mind that every workplace has its difficulties. But considering the special nature of our work, difficult personalities must be identified and assessed; we must understand their nature and personality, and then put into action coping strategies to deal with the individual.

Here are seven typical difficult types, reasons you need to understand them, and ways to deal with them:

INDECISIVES: These workers tend to stall in making any kind of minor or major decision. They can never figure out to go outside or to stay in, sing a song or read a book, go out to lunch or eat in. While they tend to be helpful in their own way, they cannot make up their minds or avoid taking any action. This drives decisive folks nuts.

In understanding these stallers, take into consideration that they don't want to distress or hurt others. In their thinking, by delaying an action, it becomes moot or irrelevant, that it will naturally go away. This is beating around the bush at its worst.

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In coping with stallers, one has to be direct when you perceive a persistent lack of drive. Suggest solving an issue or problem together and provide alternatives and support. And avoid work overloads since very little is likely to be done.

KNOW-IT-ALLS: These types tend to be real Bulldozers. Typical traits are the ever-popular SUPERIORITY complex that drives everybody crazy. They tend to humiliate, immobilize, and create anger because they can be so insufferable. Humility is not in their vocabulary. It is comforting to know that they can also be a fake: believing that they know what they are talking about. They see others' expertise as irrelevant.

Because we are so much more humble, try to understand these Superior Beings. Yes, they may be an Expert and knowledgeable in certain areas. Since they can often speak and act beyond their knowledge, one must be prepared in dealing with them.

In coping with Know-It-Alls, do your homework; know your stuff in order to trump their game. Be kind by listening and acknowledging their real expertise. Question firmly, but don't confront or argue since they tend to be condescending. Instead, put them to work! Let them be the 'expert' on your team.

AGREEABLE: These are your Super Nice coworkers who are considering you their Best Friend Forever — BFF. They are so nice because they tell things that are satisfying to hear. "I just love what you're wearing!" They totally agree with you — only to let you down later. Everyone feels great around them because they use humor to ease a conversation and makes others feel liked.

In understanding your Agreeable, Super Nice coworker, be clear that they primarily want to be liked and loved — to an extreme! By being nice they avoid conflict and may not/cannot follow through on real work issues. And the

Super Nice 'Sensitivity' can mask phoniness.

In coping with the Super Nice, request honest opinions and answers. Show an interest in who they are. Be personable but with reservations; keep the lines of professionalism and personal clear. And don't feel obligated to go along with their humor.

COMPLAINERS: Also known as the Work Whiners, these are the people who find fault with everything and have an endless list of complaints, however vague. They always exaggerate the lack of toilet paper in the bathroom.

In understanding COMPLAINERS, know that they feel powerless and have a history and sense of injustice. "I should have been named the director of this center." While they think they are 'perfect,' they truly have no sense of responsibility.

So, how do we cope with Complainers? Listen. Let them vent since some complaints may have merit. Summarize complaints and ask for specific solutions. Coax them into problem solving. Just don't agree with their complaint! And consider going out on a limb: Be outrageous! "You are right! Let's burn the building down!"

SILENT TYPES: Who knew sweet Miss Smith was a Clam? The Silent types tend to be unresponsive, close down, and avoid direct questions. They are so hard to 'read' because they are so quiet and passive, driving extroverts to scratch the walls.

In understanding Clams, recognize the nature of introverts and the work values they bring to the work place. At the same time, silence can be calculated aggression or a way to avoid or evade the Self. As introverts, they may feel they have nothing to contribute to the team, mainly because the extroverts tend to rule.

In working with Silent types, ask open-

ended questions preferably in a one-on-one setting to ease tension. Be friendly and open, providing silence and quiet time. Comment on the here and now by allowing time to reflect and answer. Repeat this process as often as necessary and be consistent in building rapport.

AGGRESSIVE TYPES: Is a Sherman Tank driving through your center? These people are hostile, intimidating, and overwhelming. They are not easy to like since we tend to avoid them as much as possible: "Here she comes!"

So, how do we come to understand these bullies? The nature of their aggressiveness may have a history that is life-long and now you work together. Understand that they need to be right, have a strong sense of how others should think and act, and can be a bit superior. And worse, they don't like to lose. Yikes!

Be smart and resourceful in coping with Aggressive Types. First, don't fight them. Let them 'lose steam' and cut off communication if necessary. Like we do with some children, maintain eye contact, and use their name LOUDLY and often. State your opinion forcefully and honestly. And while challenging, try to remain friendly; make the contact comfortable and neutral. Good luck!

NEGATIVISTS: These folks turn blue skies into hurricanes. They are also known as the Wet Blankets. They recite the mantra: "things will not work out." For the most part, these folks are capable and talented, but have lost their way into a dark corner. Now they are dispirited, defeated, and pessimistic.

In understanding these dark clouds, recognize that they are angry and resentful of circumstances in their world: home, work, nation, planet, the universe. They tend to see 'forces' that are absolute, immutable barriers. Of real concern is their potential to tap despair in others, a very detrimental influence that can impact the organization. "Yes! We are losing our jobs

and we'll be out on the streets begging!"

While we want to tell Negativists to chill out, there are other ways we can work with them, coping skills we can suggest. First, don't fall into their traps. Don't argue. Be your optimistic self. Generate possible solutions slowly. Use their gloomy perspectives constructively for contingency planning: "By golly, Harry, is right! We will be out in the streets by month's end. Let's party!"

Of course, these are just a few types of difficult people we may encounter in work situations. And some of us may encounter none of these individuals in our work, while some of us work with all of them. Regardless, here is a template for dealing with cantankerous people:

- assess the situation and recognize individual circumstances
- stop wishing they were different; most people will not change overnight
- get some distance between you and the difficult behavior
- formulate a plan of action with outcomes and consequences
- implement your strategies
- evaluate and reassess.

Part of this work is also a self-reflection of how we see others and how our own values and beliefs affect our relationships and interactions. Is the person that bugs you truly difficult or is he just different? Workplaces are increasingly diverse; we have class differences, ethnicities, languages, cultures, genders, religions, and other diversity factors. Truly, what we may find difficult may depend on the

context of the situation and our world view. A little self-reflection will help you create a greater balance in dealing with all of your coworkers.

Our goal is to have a great and harmonious community for the children, families, and our fellow colleagues. For now, avoid any drastic actions in dealing with the difficult people you work with. Be smart and balanced in your approach. Stop and think of how the things you say and do will affect others. Never lose control of your emotions or sense of professionalism. And who knows, maybe those cantankerous types will turn out to be your BFFs!

Irreverent resources

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